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WHAT IS NEWS?*

"But all the Athenians, and strangers which were there, spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing."

Such is the record, nearly twenty centuries old, concerning the dwellers and sojourners in that city of learning, Athens, in Greece. Upon this authority, the "itching ear," the "nose for news," the lip "that repeateth a matter," may prove themselves the classic features on the face of human nature, though they are none the less unlovely because of their great age.

If we may give ear to hosts of English and American critics who have expressed themselves, with increasing insistency and severity, in the periodicals of the last two years, we Americans, with our "national gift for news-getting," must see in ourselves the chattering counterpart of the Athenians,— but with this advantage on our side: that we possess a device for preserving and distributing chatter never dreamed of by those cultured gossips.

"Some new thing" passed eagerly from lip to lip — that was news to the ancient Greek.

But what is news to the modern American?

"News?" complains the needy Correspondent, scribbling as he talks; "news is anything and everything that the news-editor will buy."

"News!" snaps the Blue-Pencil in reply; "it is something my correspondents do not seem to recognize when they meet it face to face."

"News," smiles the Paper-Owner, glancing over his ledgers, "why, news, to be sure, is whatever makes my paper sell."

"News?" whispers the Advertiser, anxiously; "it is anything that will not warn the public against the wares I offer for sale."

"News?" sighs the restless Average Reader, longing for entertainment; "it is some excitement that fills a passing moment with interest."

* A paper read before a meeting of the Times-Dispatch Correspondents' Association, Richmond, Virginia, November 10, 1909.

"News," prattles the Society Woman, "is my name in the paper often, with charming descriptions of my frocks and my social graces."

"News!" puffs the Politician. "It is the truth, sir, or the untruth, that weakens the other party and strengthens my own!"

"News!" boasts the Front Page, in shrieking superlatives. "News is the very newest fact, the very latest information, the most surprising development, the most unexpected intelligence, the most startling knowledge, the most shocking report, about any topic,— yes, *any* topic!"

"News!" groans the Opinion-Editor, in martyr-spirit; "it is something I must comment upon, and draw a moral from, to-day, and ignore to-morrow when it deserves correction, apology, or retraction."

"News!" thunder the Critics, in accusing chorus; "what is news but a horrible witches' mixture! A rehash of falsehood, sensation, scandal, and crime, served with a salad of silly trivialities, senseless personals, and impertinent spyings into private life, and flavored with a sauce of vulgar jests!"

And so, "News?" we are forced to conclude, riddling like Tennyson's Merlin:

Rain, rain, and sun! A rainbow on the lea!
And news is this to me, and that to thee;
And news or truth or falsehood let it be.

No two readers, no two editors, no two paper-owners, it would seem, hold the same opinion as to what constitutes real news, but the same confessions of those within newspaper circles, and the severe arraignments and vigorous onslaughts of those without, convince us that news is much that it should not be, and lead us to inquire what elements do enter into news as it now is, not, necessarily, as it should be.

The time-element seems the characteristic most esteemed by both press and public. Recall, as evidence of this the number of papers that claim "to print all the news, and print it first." The desire to be first in any honorable field of enterprise is an ideal, but to be first, or at least not second, in the news-field is

a necessity. What is fresh to-day is stale to-morrow; what, to-day, flaunts itself in two scare-head columns on the front page, may, to-morrow, meekly hide itself in an eighth column on the third page, and the day after to-morrow be forgotten.

What, in its own eyes, is the greatest triumph of a big daily paper? Is it not the gigantic "scoop," the prideful appearance in its columns of an important piece of news before rival journals have secured it? Those who work in newspaper offices in perpetual contact with this fleeting, evanescent quality of news, and under the unceasing whip of time, must live in a chronic state of gasping for breath. Is this mad scramble for the latest happenings but a reflection of our most dangerous national trait? Is it not, rather, somewhat responsible for our habit of rushing, and for the regrettable fact that nobody any longer understands the graceful art of doing anything in a leisurely fashion or even has time for courtesy?

Freshness is assuredly a desirable quality of news, but it is often enjoyed at the expense of veracity. There is no greater enemy to accuracy in any line of work than haste, and where time presses most urgently, as in the news-business, the tendency to error is greatest. Every reputable journal makes more or less conscientious efforts to verify its statements; yet, in the very nature of things, it must fail if freshness is the paramount consideration, for investigation and verification take time, and time is the last thing the paper of to-day will take, since news is no news after it has once appeared in the columns of a competitor. And so, relying mostly upon hearsay, the journal fills its paragraphs with half-digested information, scrappy, misleading details, and absurd rumors, or with the gratuitous prophecies and cunning inferences of its ingenious news-writers, with such results that a cynical wit asserts, "I read to-day's newspapers for fun, and it is great fun. But when I'm on the still hunt for information, I wait three days, and then if anything more is said about it, I begin to think it's so."

The power of inference may be of immense value to the reporter, as journalists maintain, but inferences are not facts, and there is a way of putting two and two together that does

not make four. A story recently told by the late Governor Johnson, of Minnesota, gives a case in point:

"Some fifteen years ago a newcomer from Iowa started a Democratic paper in a little town in southern Minnesota. A campaign was in progress, and a one-legged man, habitually attired in a blue suit, was the candidate for register of deeds. It was easy to think of him as a veteran of the Civil War, and the local paper of which I speak published a vigorous eulogy of the old soldier, urging the election of 'the deserving veteran who left a limb on a Southern battle-field.'

"The chargin of the editor may be imagined when his Republican contemporary came out the next week with the information that the candidate had never been a soldier, and that his leg was taken off by a cider-press in Pennsylvania ten years after the war had closed."

"Publish in haste, and repent at leisure" might well be the motto of modern journalism, if modern journalism were at all in the habit of repenting. To print less news but more accurate, would, of course, considerably reduce the sixteen pages of half-truths euphoniously called "the history of to-day," but that would be an inestimable blessing to the press itself as well as to the long-suffering public. We can but agree with the homely philosophy of Josh Billings: "Better not know so many things than know so many things that ain't so." There are frequent inaccuracies in the papers, however, not traceable to hurry. If we may credit the startling revelations made by Mr. Salisbury in "The Confessions of a Journalist," we must believe that reporters are sometimes taught that when there is no news some must be manufactured. The sheep of the news-world tell us, with much feeling, that such a practice is the exclusive prerogative of the goats, the "yellow" journals, and that no decent newspaper will even countenance such "faking." If this be true, we are forced to the conclusion that the innocent sheep must often have the wool pulled over their eyes by designing newsmongers who make their living as conscienceless retailers of gossip.

In proof of this, we are informed upon good authority, that important interviews with J. Pierpont Morgan and Mrs. Hetty

Green, which most of us read in irreproachable journals not many months ago, never occurred. As further evidence, Mr. Robert Lincoln O'Brien vouches for the fact that the scheme proposed in well-known Washington papers to change the name of the Philippine Islands to McKinley Islands, as a tribute to the President, who had just died, was "a hot weather idea" hatched by a group of resourceful reporters who "put their heads together" when there was a dearth of news.

There is another phase of journalistic honesty even rarer than the printing of well attested facts, and that is publishing even correct items of news in truthful proportions, with intelligent regard to their relative and actual news-values. If that were done, we should not have it appear that baseball, legitimate enough in itself, is the most glorious enterprise of our great nation, and that the pitcher who wins the national championship games is the biggest hero of our American Republic. If that were done, we should not see displayed on the front pages of thoroughly reputable papers, as we did a few days ago, a New York society woman's mirthful opinion, flippantly expressed, of the disgraceful association of her own name with a famous divorce suit. If that were done, we should no longer dignify as real news such banalities as what breakfast food a pugilist prefers, what a French dancing-girl thinks of America, how a stingy rich woman goes shopping, how a little negro girl distinguishes herself in a spelling-match in Cincinnati, or how a prima donna dresses her poodle.

If the element of truth in news clashes with freshness on the one hand, it as surely clashes with interest on the other, and since these are the indispensable requisites of journalism, truth suffers mortal hurt in the unequal conflict. Be timely, or not at all; be truthful, if you can conveniently; be interesting, at all hazards — this seems the policy of the press. Many facts, in their pure-fact character, are not interesting; the reporters must make them so by "touching them up." The Sunday "specials" show us what liberties the sensation-makers take in the all-compelling name of interest. While the element of the uncommon is habitually sought for in news, it is emphasized a thousandfold in the Sunday paper, which "features" or ex-

plotts the remarkable, the wonderful, the freakish, the bizarre, the fantastic, the startling, the seemingly impossible, with all the flash and noise and italics at its command. There seems absolutely no limit to the scope of the extravaganzas considered peculiarly fitting reading for God's holy day.

Perhaps this particular form of sensationalism is only one among many of the hurtful, vicious extremes of all sorts that have fastened themselves, like vampires, upon our American life. That we have put up with it so long in our papers is an evidence either of our ignorant, lazy credulity or of our criminal carelessness about the truth of what we read.

Not satisfied with perverting and distorting truth, news demands yet another victim to timeliness and interest, and that is the moral value of the information published. Such a sacrifice is ruinous and disastrous past all conception. No thinking person can seriously question the truth of the assertion, "A people is profoundly influenced by whatever is persistently brought to its attention." Judged by that statement, the press has much to answer for in the prostitution of its noble sentiment-forming power to the daily publication of all the forms of scandal and wickedness known to the criminal court. Within the past week reputable papers have carried into thousands of homes with unnecessary pictures and unpardonable details, the reports of a notorious murder trial in Paris prefacing the publication with the remark that even the scenes in court "would disgrace a barroom." They were given abundant space, nevertheless, and the apologetic comment was not a strong enough antiseptic to wash away the uncleanness of the news.

It is worse than useless to deal out dainty, homeopathic doses of moralizing in editorials, while the news-columns overflow with all the horrors of the criminal calendar. If the newspaper is "the most influential educator" of our times, it is the news-sheet that is our schoolmaster, and not the editorial page, as the most able editors themselves would sadly acknowledge if they could afford to be frank on this question. The mighty influence of the editorial may have been the pride of journalism in the last generation, but its glory is almost departed in this.

And who shall say that this is not the manner in which the press has revenged itself upon itself, with sinister cunning, for educating our boys and girls in a school for scandal and crime unparalleled by any other nation?

Most of us are familiar with the statements by which journalism has tried to disclaim responsibility and accountability for its wretched evils of mendacity and reckless exploitation of sensation and infamy, and some of us have allowed ourselves to believe them.

"News is whatever the people wish to read," says the representatives of the press, "and we must give it to them."

Or, "The public has a right to know everything that is going on in the world; we are merely its bureaus of information."

And again, "Every newspaper is just as good as its particular readers wish it to be."

Fallacies, for the most part. How has the public gained the divine right of knowing either what is, negatively, of no value, since it is not accurate, or what is, positively, hurtful and dangerous, since it is moral poison?

Furthermore, what really serious effort has any journal ever made, outside of the test of its subscription-list and cash-book, to find out what its readers wish as news? And what real satisfaction has any one ever received who made a specific complaint against impertinent personal comment, inaccuracy, or immoral influence in news-paragraphs? The attitude of the press toward this sort of thing is an open secret: he who has the temerity to express such complaint must be made to understand that the paper is always right; his protest must be treated as high treason against journalism, and must be answered in a fashion to prevent a repetition of his offense and deter others from following his unrighteous example of questioning the sacred freedom of the press.

It seems never to have occurred to the newspaper, though it has ferreted out everything else, that it may be possibly under-rating the judgment and discrimination of its readers, or miscalculating the strength of their censure, or deceiving itself with the thought that because its patrons do not openly express

their disapproval, they therefore feel none. That the muttered dissatisfaction of thousands of readers has not swelled into a storm of protest may be largely owing to the fact that the malcontents have not yet grown earnest enough to forget their fear of the stinging lash of ridicule with which a self-protecting press is wont to punish all petitioners for corrections and improvement in news-columns.

But one of the most astonishing half-truths that journalism has yet set afloat is that the public itself is solely responsible for the character of the news it devours. That the press, should, on one side of its mouth, boast of its power as a molder of opinion, yet, on the other side of the same mouth protest its weakness and helplessness as the puppet and slave of the sentiment which it has confessedly created, is one of the most interesting examples of begging the question and arguing in a circle that was ever born in the unstable realm of sophistry.

Imagine, if you can, a weakly indulgent parent, who has allowed a child to eat habitually of every form of unwholesome food, upbraiding the unhappy little victim in these cruel words: "You wilful, wicked child! It is your own fault that your digestion is ruined and your health wrecked. You would have harmful things to eat, and I prepared them for you because I had no right to deny your wishes and no power to control your appetite!"

Then imagine, if you will, that thinking readers are convinced when the press, in self-justification, says to a sensation-fed people whose morbid appetite has been whetted to an inordinate degree by inaccuracy and vice served so skilfully and attractively as to seem pleasing to the taste: "Pray, don't blame me if you are hurt by what I have given you; you wished for it and I had to grant your desires, but I am in no way responsible for your depraved taste. Your suffering be on your own head!"

Such an inconsistency is a flimsy, false covering under which no self-respecting newspaper should longer try, ostrich-like, to hide its head while its unsightly body is fully exposed to view. That supply is, in all cases, merely the result of demand, is a fallacy long ago pointed out by wise economists. It may have

been altogether true once, but anybody that knows anything at all about present-day business methods knows that the dominating spirit of that intense commercialism which now holds civilization in its octopus-grip speaks thus: "Only a weakling, an imbecile in the business world, meekly waits until there is a demand for what he has to offer. If you are a real, sane, flesh-and-blood man, get up and hustle and *create* such a demand that you must strain your powers to breaking to meet it."

And that, to my mind, is exactly what the modern press, with a few shining exceptions commercial to its inmost fiber, has done.

If twentieth-century journalism really would be the irresistible power for good that it so ardently wishes to be, it now has the one opportunity to achieve it that an eternity can offer: Let it create such an insistent demand for the right kind of news that we shall no longer cry out for a satisfactory definition of the perplexing term; let it give a noble new meaning to the abused old word "news," making it more nearly synonymous with "fact" and "truth," not despoiled of timeliness and interest, yet forever purged of any wilful taint of an insinuating impurity.

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